

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# READING TEXT APPROPRIATENESS AND READING COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS IN THE TEXTBOOK “SIAP MERDEKA BELAJAR BAHASA INGGRIS” BY BUDIYONO, ET AL. AND “ENGLISH” BY DENDY DESMAL, ET AL.

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**Abstract:** This study investigates the appropriateness of reading texts and comprehension questions in two Indonesian senior high school English textbooks: *Siap Merdeka Belajar Bahasa Inggris* by Budiyo et al. and *English* by Dendy Desmal et al. Using qualitative content analysis, the study adopts Nuttall's (1996) framework, these are suitability, exploitability, and readability to evaluate the reading texts, and Day and Park's (2005) taxonomy to analyze comprehension questions across six levels: literal, reorganization, inferential, prediction, evaluative, and personal response. Findings reveal inconsistencies in content relevance, authenticity, and language difficulty across texts in both books. Furthermore, the comprehension questions largely emphasize lower-order thinking skills (LOTS), with limited emphasis on higher-order thinking skills (HOTS). The study highlights the need for textbook improvement to align with learners' cognitive levels, language proficiency, and curriculum standards. It contributes to the field of English language teaching by providing practical recommendations for textbook evaluation and instructional material development.

**Keywords:** textbook evaluation; reading comprehension; reading text appropriateness;

## KESESUAIAN TEKS BACAAN DAN PERTANYAAN PEMAHAMAN MEMBACA DALAM BUKU TEKS “SIAP MERDEKA BELAJAR BAHASA INGGRIS” OLEH BUDIYONO, DKK. DAN “ENGLISH” OLEH DENDY DESMAL, DKK

**Abstrak:** Penelitian ini mengkaji kesesuaian teks bacaan dan pertanyaan pemahaman bacaan dalam dua buku teks Bahasa Inggris untuk siswa SMA di Indonesia: *Siap Merdeka Belajar Bahasa Inggris* oleh Budiyo dkk. dan *English* oleh Dendy Desmal dkk. Dengan menggunakan analisis isi kualitatif, penelitian ini mengadopsi kerangka kerja dari Nuttall (1996), yaitu *suitability*, *exploitability*, dan *readability* untuk mengevaluasi teks bacaan, serta taksonomi dari Day dan Park (2005) untuk menganalisis pertanyaan pemahaman berdasarkan enam tingkatan: literal, reorganisasi, inferensial, prediksi, evaluatif, dan respons pribadi. Temuan menunjukkan adanya ketidakkonsistenan dalam relevansi konten, keautentikan, dan tingkat kesulitan bahasa dalam teks-teks di kedua buku

tersebut. Selain itu, pertanyaan pemahaman cenderung menekankan keterampilan berpikir tingkat rendah (LOTS), dengan penekanan yang terbatas pada keterampilan berpikir tingkat tinggi (HOTS). Penelitian ini menekankan perlunya perbaikan buku teks agar selaras dengan tingkat kognitif siswa, kemampuan bahasa, dan standar kurikulum. Penelitian ini memberikan kontribusi praktis dalam evaluasi buku teks dan pengembangan bahan ajar.

**Kata kunci:** evaluasi buku teks; pemahaman bacaan; kesesuaian teks bacaan;

## INTRODUCTION

English is globally acknowledged as a critical language for international communication, academic discourse, and economic mobility. In Indonesia, English is taught as a compulsory subject within the national curriculum to prepare students for global participation. According to Jenkins and Panero (2025), English is widely used across the world, with most of its users being non-native speakers, highlighting its importance in cross-cultural contexts. In line with this, Montgomery (2013) noted that English has become the dominant medium in science, technology, and diplomacy, it makes English proficiency an essential academic and professional asset.

The Indonesian National Education System, as regulated by the Ministry of National Education (Kementerian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan, 2003), positions English as the primary foreign language taught in schools, highlighting its strategic importance in preparing students to participate in global communication, education, and employment. This policy reflects the growing demand for English proficiency as a key competency in the era of globalization, where access to international knowledge, technology, and professional networks increasingly depends on English mastery. Consequently, English instruction in Indonesia is not merely an academic subject but a fundamental tool for enhancing students' global competitiveness and lifelong learning capacities.

In line with this policy, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum introduces a more learner-centered approach to English language teaching. The curriculum emphasizes the balanced development of the four core language skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—while simultaneously fostering higher-order thinking skills, including critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving. Harmer (2007) argues that these language skills are inherently interconnected and should not be taught in isolation; instead, effective English instruction requires an integrated-skills approach that mirrors authentic language use. Through such integration, learners are encouraged to apply multiple skills simultaneously, enabling more meaningful communication and deeper language acquisition.

Furthermore, recent studies have highlighted the growing importance of critical thinking within English language learning, particularly in academic contexts. Nahiyan and Rahman (2025) emphasize that English for Academic Purposes (EAP) should go beyond linguistic accuracy to cultivate learners' ability to analyze, evaluate, and synthesize information critically. This perspective aligns with the objectives of the Merdeka Curriculum, which seeks to develop independent and reflective learners. By integrating critical thinking into English instruction, students are better equipped to engage with complex texts, construct logical arguments, and communicate ideas effectively, thereby meeting both academic and real-world communicative demands.

Among the four language skills, reading plays a crucial role in supporting learners' overall language development, particularly in expanding vocabulary, enhancing comprehension, and fostering independent learning. Through reading, students are exposed to a wide range of linguistic input, including varied lexical items, grammatical patterns, and discourse structures, which contributes significantly to their language proficiency. In academic contexts, reading also serves as a primary means through which learners access subject knowledge, making it an essential skill for academic achievement across disciplines. Reading, however, extends far beyond the mechanical

process of decoding written symbols. It is an active and complex cognitive activity that involves constructing meaning, making inferences, and connecting textual information with prior knowledge and personal experiences. Grabe and Stoller (2013) emphasize that effective reading requires the integration of lower-level processes, such as word recognition, with higher-level processes, including interpretation and critical evaluation of texts. Similarly, Nuttall (1996) argues that successful readers actively interact with texts by predicting content, identifying main ideas, and interpreting implicit meanings, rather than passively receiving information.

From a cognitive perspective, reading comprehension depends heavily on both linguistic competence and mental engagement. Perfetti (2007) explains that accurate and automatic word recognition enables readers to allocate more cognitive resources to higher-order comprehension processes, such as reasoning and integration of ideas. When students struggle with basic word recognition, their cognitive load increases, which negatively affects comprehension. Consequently, strong reading skills are closely linked to students' academic success, as proficient readers are better equipped to understand complex texts, engage in critical thinking, and perform effectively in academic tasks.

In this context, textbooks play a crucial role in mediating English instruction. They serve as structured learning resources that shape teaching and assessment while providing exposure to authentic language use (Peraturan Menteri Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan, 2016). However, various studies in Indonesia report concerns regarding the quality, relevance, and authenticity of English textbooks, particularly in their reading materials. Nesi *et al.* (2022) found that many textbooks lack alignment with learners' needs and modern pedagogical practices. Similarly, Nurhidayati and Kusumawati (2023) emphasized the need to revise and update English textbooks to ensure contextual relevance and learner engagement.

Authenticity in reading texts is a significant concern. Zakiyah and Tiarina (2023) highlight that reading passages in Indonesian textbooks often lack real-world context, limiting students' exposure to natural language use. Nafisah and Mulyani (2024) support this by demonstrating that authentic materials improve vocabulary retention and reading performance. Moreover, the appropriateness of reading materials must be evaluated based on students' cognitive levels and cultural relevance (McDonough & Shaw, 2013; Istihari *et al.*, 2025). Equally important as the reading texts themselves are the comprehension questions that accompany them, as these questions play a central role in guiding students' interaction with the text. Well-designed comprehension questions help learners focus on key ideas, monitor their understanding, and engage more deeply with textual content. Rather than functioning solely as assessment tools, comprehension questions can serve as instructional devices that scaffold students' cognitive processes and promote meaningful reading experiences.

Effective comprehension questions should encourage students to move beyond surface-level understanding toward deeper cognitive engagement. Henny *et al.* (2022) argue that high-quality questions challenge learners to analyze information, evaluate arguments, and apply knowledge in new contexts, thereby supporting the development of higher-order thinking skills. Such questions align with contemporary educational goals that emphasize critical thinking, problem-solving, and reflective learning, particularly within learner-centered curricula. By engaging in these cognitive processes, students are better able to construct meaning and develop transferable academic skills.

Despite their pedagogical importance, research indicates that many instructional materials fail to maximize the potential of comprehension questions. Zainil *et al.* (2021) found that a substantial proportion of textbook questions remain focused on lower-order thinking skills (LOTS), such as recalling explicit information or identifying isolated facts. This imbalance limits students' opportunities to practice higher-order thinking skills (HOTS), including analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. As a result, learners may become accustomed to shallow reading practices, underscoring the need for more cognitively demanding comprehension questions in reading materials.

Despite the importance of evaluating both the reading texts and their comprehension questions, limited studies have conducted comparative analyses of English textbooks used in Indonesian high schools. In response to this research gap, this study aims to analyze and compare the reading text appropriateness and reading comprehension questions in two widely used textbooks: *Siap Merdeka Belajar Bahasa Inggris* by Budiyo et al. and *English* by Dendy Desmal et al. The evaluation is based on Nuttall's (1996) criteria suitability, exploitability, and readability and Day and Park's (2005) six levels of comprehension questions. By doing so, this research contributes to improving textbook quality and aligning instructional materials with the goals of the *Merdeka Curriculum*.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design using content analysis to examine the appropriateness of reading texts and comprehension questions in two senior high school English textbooks used in Indonesia. The analysis was grounded in two theoretical frameworks: Nuttall's (1996) criteria for evaluating text appropriateness suitability, exploitability, and readability and Day and Park's (2005) taxonomy of reading comprehension question levels. The research focused on two textbooks for Grade X: *Siap Merdeka Belajar Bahasa Inggris* by Budiyo et al. and *English* by Dendy Desmal et al. These books were selected due to their widespread use in Indonesian schools aligned with the *Merdeka Curriculum*.

The data collection involved identifying, categorizing, and coding all reading texts and their corresponding comprehension questions in both textbooks. The instruments used were evaluation checklists adapted from Nuttall (1996) and Day & Park (2005), respectively: Reading Text Evaluation Checklist assessed each text on three dimensions: content relevance (suitability), language and instructional potential (exploitability), and linguistic complexity (readability); and Comprehension Question Evaluation Checklist categorized each question into one of six levels: literal, reorganization, inferential, prediction, evaluative, and personal response.

Data were analyzed qualitatively through coding and thematic categorization. Reading texts were scored based on the presence or absence of indicators within the three criteria. Comprehension questions were grouped according to cognitive demand. Percentages were calculated to compare trends across the two textbooks.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The evaluation of reading texts in both textbooks using Nuttall's (1996) framework—suitability, exploitability, and readability—revealed varying levels of appropriateness. In *Siap Merdeka Belajar Bahasa Inggris* by Budiyo et al., approximately 33.6% of the texts met suitability criteria, 36.3% were deemed exploitable for achieving learning objectives, and 30.1% were rated readable for Grade X students. Similarly, in *English* by Dendy Desmal et al., 36.16% of the texts met suitability standards, 34.09% fulfilled exploitability criteria, and 29.75% were considered readable. These findings suggest that a substantial proportion of reading texts in both textbooks were not optimally aligned with students' linguistic proficiency and cognitive development. Comparable results have been reported by Zainil et al. (2021) and Putra and Sari (2020), who found that many EFL textbooks contain texts that are either overly simplified or linguistically dense, thereby limiting students' engagement and comprehension. Such imbalance may hinder learners from developing effective reading strategies and sustained interest in reading.

Analysis of comprehension questions using Day and Park's (2005) taxonomy further demonstrated an uneven distribution across cognitive levels. Literal comprehension questions dominated in both textbooks, accounting for 34.58% in *Siap Merdeka Belajar Bahasa Inggris* and 32.10% in *English*. In contrast, inferential and higher-order levels—particularly evaluative and

personal response questions—were significantly underrepresented. Only 9.77% of the questions in Budiyo *et al.*’s textbook and 6.17% in Dendy Desmal *et al.*’s textbook required students to provide personal interpretation or critical evaluation. These findings align with earlier studies by Henny *et al.* (2022) and Zohar and Dori (2003), which revealed that EFL reading materials tend to prioritize factual recall over analytical and evaluative thinking. Similarly, Widodo and Kadarwati (2013) argue that limited exposure to higher-level questioning restricts learners’ opportunities to develop critical reading skills.

Overall, the dominance of lower-order thinking skills (LOTS) in both reading texts and comprehension questions indicates a mismatch between textbook content and the critical competencies emphasized in the Merdeka Curriculum. The limited inclusion of higher-order thinking skills (HOTS) suggests that students are rarely challenged to analyze arguments, evaluate ideas, or create meaning based on textual information. This concern has also been highlighted by Brookhart (2010), who emphasizes that sustained engagement with HOTS-oriented tasks is essential for preparing learners to face complex academic and real-world problems. Without such cognitive demands, reading instruction risks becoming procedural rather than transformative.

Comparative analysis revealed that neither textbook consistently outperformed the other across all evaluative categories. While *English* by Dendy Desmal *et al.* demonstrated slightly higher levels of text suitability, *Siap Merdeka Belajar Bahasa Inggris* offered more exploitable content aligned with instructional goals. Nevertheless, both textbooks showed similar weaknesses in integrating HOTS-based comprehension questions. This pattern mirrors findings by Cunningsworth (1995) and Tomlinson (2012), who argue that textbook quality should be evaluated holistically, as strengths in one aspect often coexist with limitations in others.

Taken together, these findings underscore the urgent need to revise EFL textbooks to better support students’ cognitive and linguistic development. Beyond textbook improvement, educators play a critical role in mediating instructional materials. Teachers should be trained to supplement textbooks with authentic reading materials and to design higher-order comprehension questions that stimulate analysis, evaluation, and personal response. As emphasized by Richards (2015), effective language teaching depends not only on textbook quality but also on teachers’ pedagogical competence in adapting materials to meet curricular goals and learners’ needs.

**Table 1**

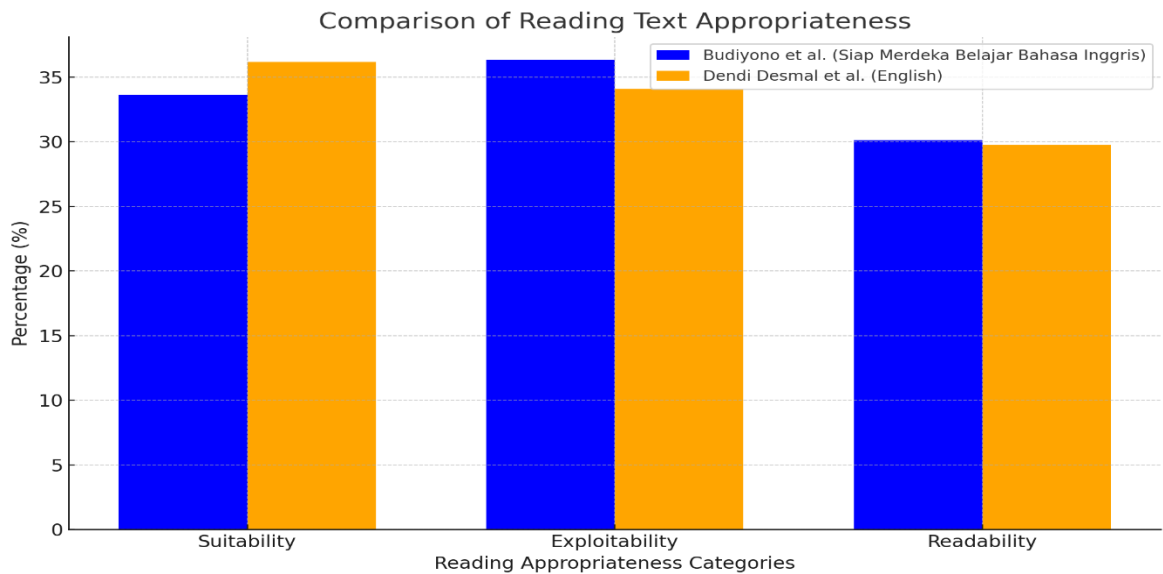
Comparison of Reading Appropriateness between Textbook *Siap Merdeka Belajar Bahasa Inggris* by Budiyo *et al.*, and *English* by Dendy Desmal *et al.*

Reading Appropriateness	Siap Merdeka Belajar (%)	English (%)
Suitability	33.6%	36.16%
Exploitability	36.3%	34.09%
Readability	30.1%	29.75%

**Table 2**

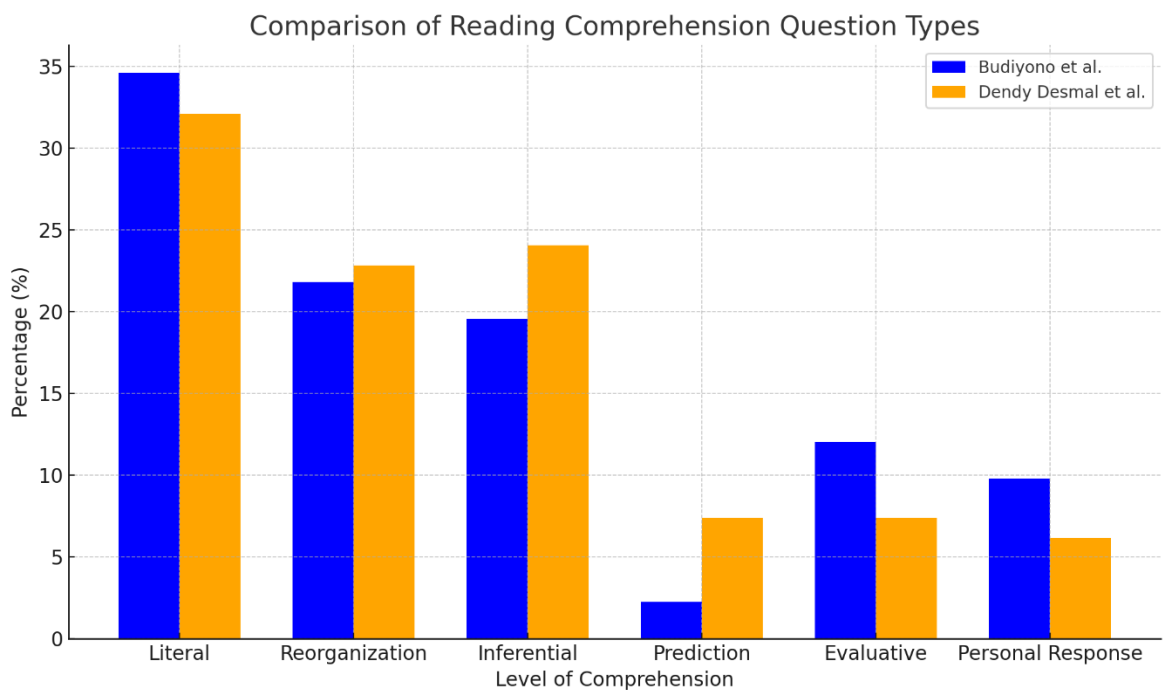
Comparison of Reading Comprehension Questions between Textbook *Siap Merdeka Belajar Bahasa Inggris* by Budiyo *et al.*, and *English* by Dendy Desmal *et al.*

Comprehension Type	Siap Merdeka Belajar (%)	English (%)
Literal Comprehension	34.58%	32.10%
Reorganization	21.81%	22.84%
Inferential Comprehension	19.55%	24.07%
Prediction	2.25%	7.41%
Evaluative	12.04%	7.41%
Personal Response	9.77%	6.17%



**Diagram 1**

Diagram Reading Text Appropriateness Textbook Siap Merdeka Belajar Bahasa Inggris by Budyono et al., and English by Dendi Desmal et al.,



**Diagram 2** Diagram Reading Comprehension Question for Siap Merdeka Belajar Bahasa Inggris by Budyono et al. and English by Dendi Desmal et al.,

## CONCLUSIONS

This study investigated the appropriateness of reading texts and comprehension questions in two senior high school English textbooks widely used in Indonesia, namely *Siap Merdeka Belajar Bahasa Inggris* by Budiyo *et al.* and *English* by Dendy Desmal *et al.* By employing Nuttall’s (1996) framework—focusing on suitability, exploitability, and readability—and Day and Park’s (2005) taxonomy of comprehension questions, the study revealed that both textbooks contain reading materials with varying degrees of instructional value. Although a number of texts were considered exploitable for achieving learning objectives, many did not sufficiently meet students’ linguistic levels or contextual needs, resulting in limitations in readability and relevance. This lack of contextual alignment may reduce students’ engagement and hinder effective comprehension.

In addition, the analysis of comprehension questions demonstrated a strong predominance of lower-order thinking tasks, particularly literal comprehension questions, in both textbooks. Higher-order cognitive demands, such as inferential reasoning, evaluation, prediction, and personal response, were minimally represented. These findings suggest that students are rarely encouraged to engage in deeper meaning-making or critical reflection on the texts they read. Consequently, the instructional design of the textbooks does not fully support the development of critical reading skills or independent thinking, which are central objectives of the Merdeka Curriculum and contemporary English language pedagogy.

Overall, the findings indicate a clear misalignment between textbook content and the curriculum’s emphasis on critical thinking, learner autonomy, and meaningful engagement with texts. While both textbooks offer useful instructional resources, their limitations in readability, contextual relevance, and cognitive challenge necessitate pedagogical intervention. Teachers are therefore encouraged to adapt and supplement textbook materials by simplifying complex texts when necessary and designing additional higher-order comprehension questions to facilitate deeper understanding and critical engagement.

Looking forward, future English textbooks should strive for a more balanced integration of teaching value and learner relevance by ensuring that reading texts are contextually appropriate, linguistically accessible, and pedagogically exploitable. Furthermore, comprehension questions should move beyond factual recall to include more evaluative, predictive, and personal response tasks that promote higher-order thinking skills. Such improvements would better align textbook content with the goals of the Merdeka Curriculum and contribute to the development of students’ critical reading abilities and overall academic success.

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